



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT
ONE UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

Testimony Re: S-0100, Child Care for Child Care Educators & EI Staff (RI Works)

Senate Finance Committee

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Jessica Vega, Senior Advocacy & Community Engagement Manager



Rhode Island KIDS COUNT coordinates the Right from the Start Campaign, a state policy coalition led by eight organizations to advance state policies and budget priorities that will help families with young children.

Both Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the Right from the Start Campaign strongly support Senator DiMario's Child Care for Child Care Educators & Early Intervention Staff bill, S-0100, which would continue a

proven program that is helping to recruit and retain staff in child care and early learning programs. We also strongly support the proposal to expand the program to allow higher income early educators to participate (as is done in Kentucky) and to make staff of Early Intervention programs eligible to help recruit and retain qualified EI staff and reduce the waiting list for Early Intervention services.

As you may remember, Speaker Shekarchi introduced a budget amendment to fund this program as a \$4 million pilot from August 2023 – July 2024 along with \$3 million in funding to address the staffing crisis in Head Start and Early Head Start which caused classrooms to close. The Head Start and Early Head Start funding was included in the Governor's FY25 and FY26 proposed budgets but unfortunately, he did not include the Child Care for Child Care Educators program in either his FY25 or FY26 budget proposal. Last year, the General Assembly continued the Child Care for Child Care Educators program in the final enacted budget, so it continued into a second year.

The Department of Human Services successfully launched the Child Care for Child Care Educators program in August 2023 and has managed it for nearly two years. It has been a remarkable success. **Almost half of the licensed early learning centers and about 5% of the licensed family child care homes in the state had at least one staff member participating.**

This strategy Kentucky established to cover the cost of child care for all child care staff has also been recommended by the [federal government](#) and the [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#) to help address the staffing crises in child care and early learning programs. Rhode Island has [gotten national attention for adopting this strategy as a pioneering state.](#)

This bill would make the program permanent, remove the family income limit to help more middle-income staff receive the benefit (Kentucky does not have a family income limit in their program), and make frontline staff in Early Intervention programs eligible. Early Intervention still has several vacant staff positions and a waiting list as of January 2025 of 283 infants and toddlers with developmental challenges.

The federal government has clearly stated that federal Child Care Development Block Grant funds can be used to fund this benefit for child care and early educators who are part of families that exceed the current family income federal limit (85% of State Median Income) – by considering early educators as a “protected population” and reviewing each case to determine that child care is not affordable to the family (e.g., would consume more than 7% of family income).

Enabling staff with higher family incomes to qualify for this benefit would directly help child care programs. Child care and early learning programs shouldn't have to search for individuals in low-income families to staff child care programs. Programs should not be incentivized to keep staff wages low so teachers with children can qualify.

Child Care Provider Comments on DHS Survey:

- *“We have gotten many more applicants who are looking to bring their child with them to work. It has really given us an opportunity to appropriately staff our center.”*
- *“This has been life changing for parents with small children to go back to work. We have truly benefited from this program as staff want to stay and work where their child attends.”*
- *“This has been an amazing experience. We were able to attract a top-notch toddler teacher who had chosen to stay home because the cost of child care was too high in comparison to her income.”*
- *“This pilot program is financially supporting our staff with young children, allowing them to work in a field that otherwise does not pay well. They are full of energy and a great asset to our program. I hope this program will continue to support the staff so they will continue to work in childcare.”*

Federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and TANF funding can be used to continue this program. In fact, last year the CCDBG allocation to Rhode Island was permanently increased by \$1.8 million and then the recent federal CR budget provided another \$582,000 in child care funding for Rhode Island. Without General Assembly action this successful program will end. It has been a critical and effective component of state efforts to address the staffing crisis in early care and education. A statewide child care organization reported in February that 20% of their classrooms were closed because they cannot find and keep staff – ending the Child Care for Child Care Educators program will make staffing challenges worse.

We know that 9 out of 10 families in Rhode Island cannot afford the cost of quality, child care – **we should start with making sure the staff of our early childhood programs get the help they need so they can come to work every day to care for and educate other people's children.**

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony and for Senator DiMario's leadership on this issue.

Early Educator Staffing Crisis 2025
Early Educator Workforce Act
H-5200 (Donovan) & S-0673 (Urso)
Child Care for Child Care Educators & EI Staff
H-5196 (Diaz) & S-0100 (DiMario)



Right from the Start

High-quality early childhood programs have effective educators who work with children and families to support young children's rapid brain development. Rhode Island is experiencing a significant staffing crisis as qualified and caring professionals leave for better paying jobs.

Child care educators make among the lowest wages in the state @ \$16.91 per hour in 2023 -- in the same range as animal caretakers and parking lot attendants. **Many child care programs have closed classrooms or are limiting enrollment, particularly for infants and toddlers, due to the inability to find qualified and caring staff to work for the wages offered.** In February, a major statewide child care organization estimated that 20% of their classrooms were closed due to the staffing crisis. In addition to reducing the availability of care, the staffing crisis impacts the quality of care because high staff turnover disrupts relationships that are essential to promote healthy child development and learning.

Since November 2021, infants and toddlers referred to Early Intervention have had to wait for services due to a staffing crisis. As of January 2025, there were 283 infants and toddlers with developmental challenges who had been waiting for Early Intervention for more than 45 days.

Critical Early Educator Investments that Must Continue

RI Early Educator Workforce Act: This bill would establish the [T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Workforce Development program](#), the [RI Early Childhood Registered Apprenticeship program](#), and the [Child Care WAGE\\$ program](#) in statute and **continue the \$1 million in general revenue allocated to reduce harm to infant/toddler programs from RI Pre-K expansion which is being used by the Rhode Island Child Care WAGE\$ program** to supplement the wages of the most qualified but lowest compensated infant and toddler educators statewide. The Child Care WAGE\$ program provides significant wage supplements (ranging from \$3,000/year for a CDA credential to \$12,000/year for a bachelor's degree in early childhood education) to credentialed early educators who earn less than \$23/hour and work on the frontlines in early learning programs. Child Care WAGE\$ has been shown to dramatically improve staff retention and the quality of care available to children. **H-5200/Donovan and S-0673/Urso would continue the \$1 million/year investment in the Child Care WAGE\$ to recognize and retain our most highly skilled but lowest paid infant and toddler educators.**

RI Child Care for Child Care Educators & EI Staff: In August 2023, the state launched a **Child Care for Child Care Educators** pilot program modeled on a successful program in Kentucky to attract and retain child care educators by covering the cost of child care for frontline staff. The program has been funded with existing federal funds through an FY24 budget amendment by Speaker Shekarchi that was continued through FY25. **The program is now scheduled to end in July 2025 unless the General Assembly removes the sunset date.** As of October 2024, 570 child care educators with 831 children under age 13 were approved to participate in the program. Almost half of the licensed child care centers and about 5% of family child care homes in the state have at least one staff member participating. Almost 75% of the approved applicants are single mothers. **Many of the applications from two working parent households have been denied because they are over the family income limit of 300% FPL.** Expanding this program to include Early Intervention (EI) staff would help attract and retain EI staff and eliminate the waiting list for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities. **H-5196/Diaz and S-0100/DiMario would remove the sunset date from this program, remove the cap on family income (to match the Kentucky model), and make Early Intervention staff eligible too.**